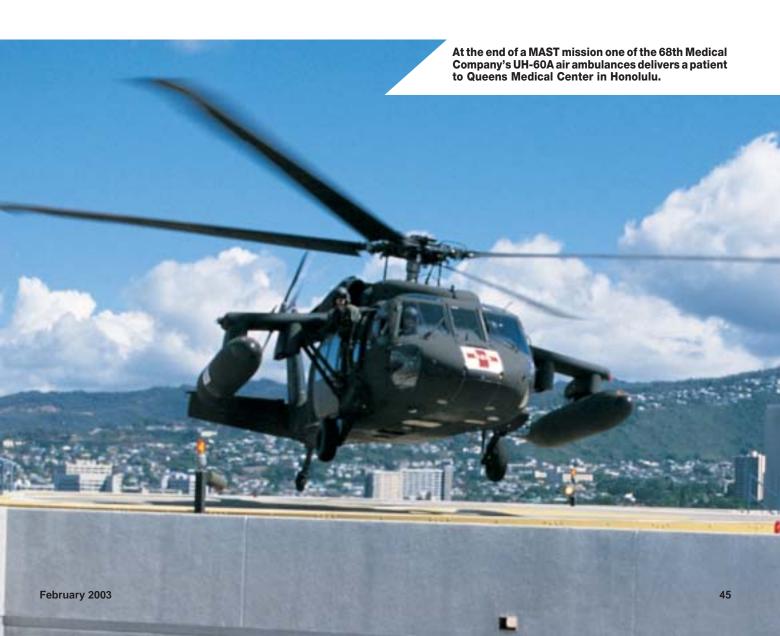


## AST TO THE

## RESCUE

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer





"The types of injuries we see as a result of our MAST mission in Hawaii certainly better prepare us for the traumatic-type injuries we might see in combat."

CPT Jason Wild performs a routine check before a mission.

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football and baseball fields, beach parks and a parking lot at the edge of a cliff, said pilot CPT Jason Wild.

"It's really strange sometimes. We go into a quiet area and suddenly there's lots of activity and a helicopter is landing in someone's backyard," Wild said.

Moving an accident victim by ground ambulance from the North Shore to the shock-trauma center at Queens Hospital in downtown Honolulu during rush-hour trafficwould take about two hours, said the 68th's unit operations officer, CW4 Gary Graham. "We can get patients there in 10 minutes."

"Hawaii doesn't have its own civil air-medical evacuation asset," said Susan Orr, manager of Trauma Services at the Queen's Medical Center in Honolulu. As the only air-ambulance provider on the island, the 68th — part of a nation-wide program called Military Assistance to Safety and Traffic, or MAST



Because the 68th Med. Co.'s Black Hawks often fly over water during rescue missions, crewmembers must undergo specialized training twice a year.

— has transported some 7,000 shock-trauma patients since the program's inception in 1974.

"We've flown nearly 6,000 MAST-related hours, transported an average of 240 people per year and saved the citizens of Hawaii roughly \$8 million," Graham added.

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The MAST program in Hawaii primarily covers Oahu, where 80 percent of Hawaii's population resides, Orr said. The 68th has occasionally flown a civilian rescue mission to one of the neighboring islands, but the unit really doesn't have the resources to do that. So when serious accidents occur on the big island of Hawaii, for example, rescuers call for commercial or privately-owned fixed-wing aircraft to help.

"On Oahu, we receive 20 to 30 patients per month through the MAST program," said Orr. "Nine times out of 10 they're tourists. Often they've been involved in a traffic accident, fallen from a cliff while hiking or suffered a spinal cord injury while surfing on Oahu's North Shore."

Other MAST rescues have involved crime victims who have been beaten, stabbed or shot.

A rockslide at a former popular destination called Sacred Falls — a mountain path that hugged the edge of a cliff and continued to a breathtaking waterfall — on Mother's Day 1999 was the island's worst-case accident to date, Orr said. Eleven visitors to the site, among them children, died in the disaster. Participation in the rescue was especially difficult for soldiers in the unit who'd never before experienced a mass-casualty situation, she said.

"We're the busiest MAST unit in the Army," said company commander MAJ James Bolton, whose unit is primarily responsible for providing medevac services for soldiers of the 25th Infantry Division and their families. "We're a 45th Corps Support Group asset, but we wear the 25th Inf. Div. patch."

When soldiers train at Hawaii's rugged Pohakuloa Training Area, about an hour's flight from Oahu, a medical evacuation crew remains onsite.

"We have crews out a total of 270 to 280 days a year supporting the training of all the U.S. military services in Hawaii," Graham said. Medevac crews typically spend one week of every month at PTA, ensuring that soldiers injured in training acci-



dents can be evacuated immediately to the hospital best equipped to meet their needs.

Thankfully, training accidents are rare, Bolton said. For every soldier or family member medevac mission, there are 25 MAST missions. That's because in other states MAST units only supplement civilian medevac assets, they're not the sole means of swift medical evacuation, Bolton said.

"The types of injuries we see as a result of our MAST mission in Hawaii certainly better prepare us for the traumatic-type injuries we might see in combat," he added.

"Over a three-week period recently, we transported two gunshot

victims — one of them shot in the neck during a robbery, the other shot three times in the chest after a drug deal went bad — and a hiker who fell 100 feet from the 18th fairway at a golf course," Bolton said.

Crew chief SGT Josh Davis formerly served in an air-assault unit in Hanau, Germany. Being in a MAST unit "is as different as night and day," he said. In his former unit there were no flight medics and twice the number of crew chiefs. And the mission was to conduct air insertions of infantry and special-forces soldiers.

Because 68th Med. Co. crews spend much of their flight time over water, they undergo rescue training

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With the "patient" safely loaded on the litter, soldiers move him to the UH-60 for evacuation.

twice a year at Bellows Air Force Base, on Oahu, with Air Force and Coast Guard personnel. They practice rescue operations, such as lowering hoists into the ocean to retrieve mock accident victims, and train local emergency responders on aircraft procedures, said SGT Armando Ocon, a 68th Med. Co. medic and instructor.

Additionally, crews train on the vast array of medical gear they carry, including splints, longboards, hoists and pneumatic trousers that squeeze the legs and force blood back to the upper body, Davis said.

All the unit's flight medics are certified emergency medical technicians, though their role is not so much to sustain life by providing medical care as it is to quickly transport victims to hospitals, Bolton said. Civilian paramedics, who typically get on the aircraft with the MAST crew, provide patient care en route to the hospital.

The MAST crew springs into action after city and county paramedics and other rescue personnel who

respond to a 911 emergency call request air medevac support, Orr said.

"We get calls at 2 o'clock in the morning," Davis added. They often involve college kids who drive while they're intoxicated.

Davis particularly remembers the medevac of a soldier who had his arm blown off on a grenade range. While that mission wasn't Davis's baptism into the unit, it was the first real eye-opener to the fact that every time they go out on a mission, soldiers of the 68th Med. Co. are responsible, to a large degree, for saving someone's life, he said.

In March 1999, the unit received congressional recognition for 25 years of service to the people of Hawaii. For the 68th's crews, however, the greatest reward is knowing that lives have been saved, Bolton said.

"We value the soldiers of the MAST unit," Orr added. "We love them. I shudder to think what our losses would be without their services." □



Soldiers check over one of the unit's Black Hawks before a mission.

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